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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that observers of spouse abuse are likely to arrive at overly dispositional causal explanations for the abusive behavior, and reject both the abusing spouse and his victim. As part of a study examining observers' perceptions of a spouse abuse incident under varying conditions, 160 college students read a vignette about spouse abuse in which the abusers either made a sincere apology and sought help, or only left a brief note. In addition, the Repression-Sensitization Scale was used to study personality differences in subjects' responses. After reading the story, subjects completed a questionnaire about their causal attributions. Pairs of subjects then either role played the abuser and victim, or engaged in a group discussion of the incident, and completed the same questionnaire plus the Repression-Sensitization Scale. While sensitizers were expected to reject both the abuser and the victim, results showed they rejected the abuser less than did repressors, and tended to derogate him less as well. There was no difference between sensitizers and repressors in their attributions of psychological disturbance to the abuser, or in their derogation or rejection of the victim. The results suggest that differences between repressors' and sensitizers' views may disappear or even become reversed when evaluating a highly negative target. (JAC)

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Causal Attributions and Person Perceptions of Repressors and Sensitizers

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Introduction

The Repression-Sensitization (R-S) Scale (Byrne, 1961) was administered as part of a study examining individuals' causal attributions and person perceptions concerning a case of spouse abuse. Previous research suggested that observers of an incident of spouse abuse would be likely to arrive at overly dispositional, as opposed to situational, causal attributions for the abusive spouse's behavior. Further evidence suggests that observers would be likely to derogate and socially reject both partners in an abusive marriage. Such reactions were felt to be in opposition to the goals of helping partners in an abusive relationship to seek help and to break their cycle of abusive interactions. In this study observer's perceptions concerning an incident of spouse abuse were examined under varying conditions. The attempt was made to alter these perceptions in ways that might have implications for the clinical problem of spouse abuse.

The actor-observer hypothesis of Jones and Nesbitt (1971) suggests that observers are systematically biased towards making overly situational causal attributions concerning another's behavior. Actors on the other hand, tend to make overly situational causal attributions concerning their own behavior. Observers of a spouse abuse situation would therefore be likely to arrive at overly dispositional causal explanations of the incident. While both the actors' and the observer's perceptions are biased (Monson and Snyder, 1977), actor's attributions are thought to be generally more accurate, because of the greater amount of information available to the actor concerning both internal and situational factors. However, many studies (Aderman, Brehm and Katz, 1974; Brehm and Aderman, 1977; Galper, 1976; Regan and Lotten, 1972; Wegner and Finstuen, 1977) have

shown that when observers can be induced to empathize with the actor, or take the actor's point of view, causal explanations of a more situational nature can be evoked. It has been suggested that the most accurate, or least biased, attributions might be achieved when an individual can experience both points of view (Galper, 1976).

Other research suggests that an individual may receive derogation and social rejection just by the act of seeking help for a behavioral problem (Phillips, 1963). And there is considerable research to suggest that when an individual seeks help, that individual will receive more derogation and rejection when the behavior is seen as due to personality, as opposed to situational, factors (Calhoun, Peirce, Walters and Dawes, 1974; Calhoun, Selby and Wroten, 1977; Cole, Pennington and Buckley, 1974).

We may conclude that the spouse abuser is likely to receive derogation and rejection when he seeks help for his problem. He will tend to be viewed negatively and will be expected to continue his abuse in the future. Such attitudes are likely to discourage spouse abusers from seeking or utilizing professional help.

In this study the causal attributions and person perceptions of individuals exposed to a story about spouse abuse were examined under varying conditions. But behavior is known to be determined by both dispositional and situational factors. Therefore in addition to investigating observers' responses in varying situations, a personality measure was sought as well. The Repression-Sensitization Scale was selected as likely to capture differences in subjects' responses to being confronted with a story about spouse abuse. The personality dimension of repression-sensitization has been

conceptualized as a continuum concerning how individuals repsond to threatening stimuli. At one extreme are the "repressors" who deny, repress, and avoid unpleasant stimuli. At the other are the "sensitizers" who respond primarily with rumination, intellectualization, and approach behaviors.

There has been a great deal of research attempting to relate the R-S Scale to other personality dimensions, and a number of such relationships have been established. It has been found to be correlated with two other MMPI subscales, Taylors' Manifest Anxiety Scale and Edwards' Social Desirability Scale (Abbott, 1972). And it has been found to be negatively correlated with most of the scales on the California Psychological Inventory, which measures individual differences in normal functioning (Byrne, Golightly, and Sheffield, 1956). Finally, the R-S Scale has been found to be positively related to measures of self-ideal discrepancy. All of these results, among others, suggest that repressors tend to be better adjusted than sensitizers, although this conclusion has not gone unchallenged.

Of relevance here is the work on R-S as it relates to attraction and to hostility and aggression. Since repressors and sensitizers differ with respect to how they react to negative information, it would seem logical that repressors would tend to ignore, fail to notice, or minimize negative information about a person, whereas sensitizers should not only notice, but exaggerate it. The evidence does in fact support such a conclusion. Repressors tend to overestimate the positive qualities and under-estimate the negative ones of a neutral target person (Kaplan, 1968) or (Duke and Wrightsman, 1968), as compared to sensitizers.

Also of relevance to this study is evidence concerninghow repressors

and sensitizers perceive hostility and aggression. Not surprisingly, repressors tend to avoid acknowledging hostility in themselves and others while sensitizers tend to exaggerate it (Altrocchi and Perlitsh, 1963; Altrocchi, Shrauger and McLeod, 1964 McDonald, 1965). It has been concluded that sensitizers have a generally more negative view of others than do repressors. In this study it was therefore hypothesized that sensitizers would derogate, reject, and attribute more psychological disturbance to both partners in a case of spouse abuse than would repressors.

Method

In this study five factors were examined for their impact on observer's causal attributions and person perceptions concerning an incident of spouse abuse: (1) sex of subject, (2) sex composition of subject group, (3) type of apology offered by the abusing husband, and (4) empathy (a role play and role reversal condition was compared with a group discussion, and (5) Repression-Sensitization. (Repressors and sensitizers were identified by a median-split).

Subjects were 160 college under-graduates who were run in 16 groups of 10 subjects each. Subjects first read a vignette about an incident of spouse abuse, which had one of two endings. The "good" apology was given face to face, sounded sincere, and indicated that he had made an appointment at the local Community Mental Health Center to get help for his abusive behavior. THe "poor" apology consisted of a brief note. The incident was a mild one in which an argument begins, escalates to the point where the couple is screaming and cursing, and finally the man (John) slaps the woman (Mary) forcefully across the face, knocking her to the floor, and storms out

of the house. After the subjects read the story they filled out a questionnaire concerning their causal attributions, their perceptions of John, and their perceptions of Mary. Then pairs of subjects either role played JOhn and Mary having a discussion after the fight, or subjects engaged in a group discussion. Subjects then completed the same questionnaire completed earlier plus the Repression-Sensitization Scale.

Five-way analyses of variance were performed on all of the pre- and post-test questions. Five-way multivariate ANOVAS were performed on the following groups of questions: (1) four questions on causal attributions, (2) three questions on empathy with John, (3) three questions on empathy with Mary, (4) eleven questions on derogation of John, (5) eleven questions on derogation of Mary, (6) four questions on social rejection of John, and (7) four questions on social rejection of Mary. There was also one question on the subjects' perception of the psychological disturbance of John and one on the psychological disturbance of Mary. All questions were rated on Likert scales. Finally univeriate and multivariate repeated measures analyses of variance were computed on the pre- and post-treatment data.

Intercorrelations were computed to insure that questions grouped together were measuring the same thing. All groups of questions were sufficiently interrelated with the exception of the causal attribution questions. There was no relationship between situational causal attribution and dispositional causal attribution.

There were no consistent differences found with respect to sex or sex composition of the group, and these results will not be discussed further.

Results

Only the results concerning repression-sensitization are presented here,

since the remainder of the results were reported in another paper.

SLIDE 1

Table 1 presents the means for derogation of John for repressors and sensitizers before treatment. On all but three of the bipolar Likert Scales, there was more derogation by repressors than by sensitizers. This difference was significant on only one of the univariate analyses, but nearly significant, $F(11,130) = 1.71$, $p < .08$, on the MANOVA. This difference is just the reverse of what was hypothesized.

SLIDE 2

Table 2 presents the means for social rejection of John by repressors and sensitizers. There was more social rejection of John by repressors than by sensitizers on three of the four questions, two of which were significant in the univariate analyses. The MANOVA was significant at $F(4,139 = 4.11$, $p < .004$. Again, this result was the opposite of what was hypothesized.

SLIDE 3

Figure 1 displays a three-way apology by treatment by R-S interaction, $F(1,125) = 5.00$, $p < .03$, for the question on situational causal attribution. This interaction was also significant on the MANOVA, $F(4,125) = 2.63$, $p < .04$.

Sensitizers made more situational attributions in the role plays when they read the poor apology. But in the group discussion, they made more situational attributions with the good apology. Repressors, on the other hand, were able to take John's point of view in the role play when they read the good apology but not when they read the poor one. In the group discussions, however, they made intermediate causal attributions regardless of the apology.

The ANOVA on psychological disturbance of John revealed no difference between sensitizers and repressors. However, sensitizers saw Mary as more disturbed than did repressors, $F(1,126) = 7.37$, $(p < .008)$, which was consistent with the hypothesis.

Conclusions

The results for repression-sensitization did not support the hypotheses, and with respect to John, contradicted them. While sensitizers were expected to derogate and socially reject both John and Mary more than were repressors, and to attribute more psychological disturbance to them, in this study sensitizers rejected John less than did repressors, and there was a trend for them to derogate him less as well. There was no difference between sensitizers and repressors in their attributions of psychological disturbance to John. With respect to Mary, there was no difference between repressors and sensitizers in their derogation or rejection of Mary, but, consistent with the hypothesis, sensitizers were found to attribute more psychological disturbance to Mary than were repressors.

The results for John would seem to contradict previous research on repression-sensitization. However, no other studies have examined repressor's and sensitizer's evaluations of a negative target person such as a wife

abuser, but only neutral targets (Kaplan, 1968), acquaintances (Altrocchi and Perlitsh, 1964), strangers (Altrocchi et al, 1964), parents (McDonald, 1965), a generalized other (Duke and Wrightsman, 1968), and a mildly negative target (Graziano, Brothen, and Berscheid, 1980). The results of this study suggest that the differences between repressors' and sensitizers' views of others may disappear or even become reversed when evaluating a highly negative target. This interpretation is supported by the fact that in this study reactions to Mary were not very different for repressors and sensitizers, and the one difference that was found (on psychological disturbance of Mary) was in the hypothesized direction. Mary might have been seen as a more neutral target than John.

A possible explanation for these results is suggested by the work relating repression-sensitization to social desirability. Abbott (1972) found that repressors are more likely to give socially desirable responses than are sensitizers. Repressors may have been giving socially desirable responses in blaming and derogating a spouse abuser. While it is not socially desirable to derogate a neutral person, it may be socially desirable to derogate a spouse abuser. Sensitizers have also been found to attribute more hostility both to themselves and others (Altrocchi and Perlitsh, 1963; Altrocchi, et al, 1964; McDonald, 1965) so may feel that a spouse abuser is more like themselves than do repressors, who deny hostility in themselves.

How can we explain the interaction between apology, treatment, and R-S on causal attribution? Sensitizers, it seems, were able to take John's point of view in the role plays regardless of the apology. But in the group discussions, they may not have taken his point of view and their attributions were then based entirely on the apology. Looked at another way, the role play treatment was effective in inducing sensitizers to take the actor's point

of view regardless of the apology. But repressors avoided taking John's point of view with the poor apology. This seems consistent with their tendency to use avoidance as a defense against threatening material. Since they do not like to acknowledge their own hostile impulses, repressors may have been reluctant to see themselves in John's role when he showed no remorse. Finally, we are really only interested in the good apology, since we do not want to alter people's perceptions of a spouse abuser who is not likely to change his behavior. Thus, with the good apology, the role play may be a better treatment for repressors than it is for sensitizers.

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Table 1

Means for Derogation of John for Repressors and Sensitizers (Pre-Treatment)

	Repressors	Sensitizers	
Question	X	X	F
Cold/Warm	4.78	4.09	9.95**
Kind/Cruel	5.70	5.47	.92
Bad/Good	4.45	4.51	.08
Unfair/Fair	5.34	5.20	.54
Strong/Weak	5.45	5.18	1.59
Dangerous/Safe	5.55	5.29	1.43
Flexible/Inflexible	6.13	6.25	.12
Sensitive/Insensitive	5.94	5.72	.78
Immature/Mature	6.14	5.52	3.59
Likeable/Unlikeable	5.68	5.36	2.55
Responsible/Irresponsible	5.68	5.80	.03

** $p < .01$

Note: Some items have been rescored. Larger values indicate more derogation.

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Table 2

Means for Social Rejection of John by Repressors and Sensitizers (Pre-Treatment)

	Repressors	Sensitizers	
Question	$\bar{X}$	$\bar{X}$	F
Unwilling to have John as a neighbor	3.13	3.12	.18
Willing to play on baseball team with John	4.70	4.05	8.23*
Discourage daughter from marrying someone like John	2.04	2.32	1.28
Willing to go fishing with John	4.71	3.91	14.31***

* $p<.05$

*** $p<.001$

Note: 1 = Strongly Agree, 7 = Strongly Disagree

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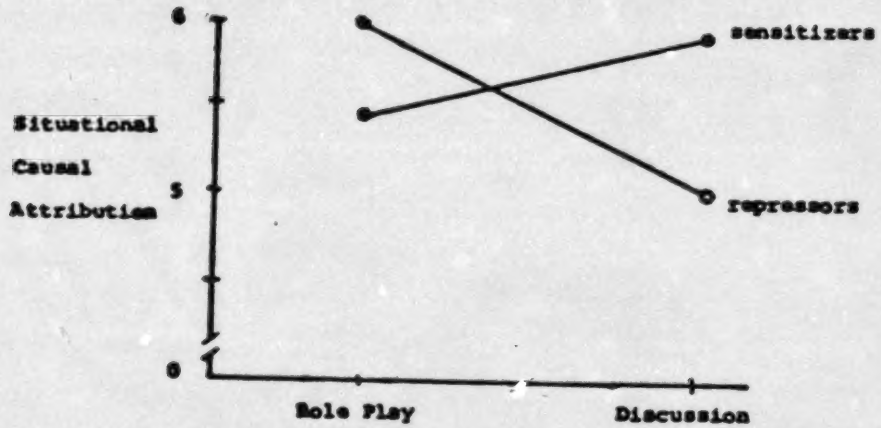
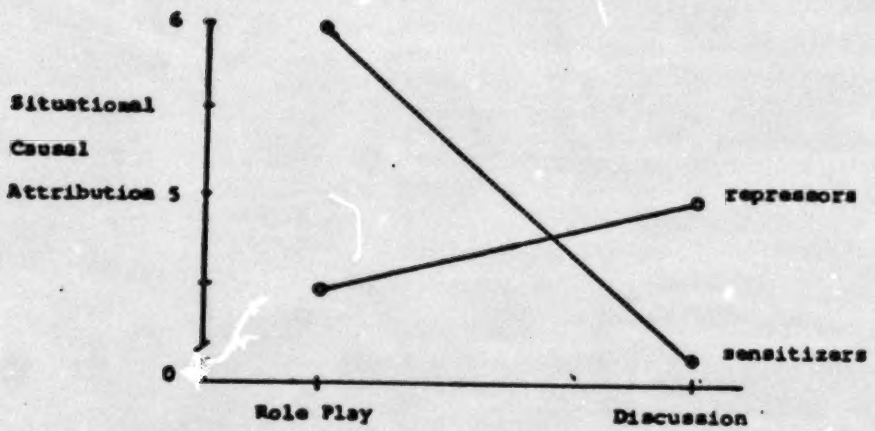
Figure 1

Apology by Treatment by R-S Interaction

for Situational Causal Attribution



Good Apology



Poor Apology

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